

**Rio Grande NF Forest Plan Revision  
Vegetation, Timber, and Fire Meeting #1  
April 27, 2015  
Alamosa, CO  
Meeting Summary**

**Attendees**

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Dan Dallas, Sid Hall, Erin Minks, Earl Robinson, Kirby Self, Michael Tooley, Martha Williamson
- *Peak Facilitation*: Kristin Barker, Heather Bergman, Katie Waller

Approximately 11 members of the public were present.

**Meeting Overview**

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this meeting to discuss vegetation, timber, and fire on the RGNF. Information gathered from this and previous discussions will help inform and influence the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

**Forest Plan Revision and Assessment Process**

Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs Officer of the Rio Grande National Forest, introduced himself and explained the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15 to 20 years. The last forest plan for the Rio Grande was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began. The revision consists of three steps expected to be completed by 2017: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform the assessment phase, in which current conditions and trends are analyzed to determine which portions of the existing plan should be changed. After determining the need for change, USFS will develop and analyze multiple management options to determine the most beneficial options for inclusion in the final forest plan.

Mr. Blakeman explained the assessment questions that were the focus of the meeting and discussed factors that could affect forest health. He also talked about how humans rely on the RGNF and posed the question of how to find a sustainable use of forest resources. Mr. Blakeman brought up the history of fire on the RGNF and asked the public to think about how this will affect the development and use of the forest in the future. He stressed the importance of public participation and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public can also provide input by email at [comments-rocky-mountain-río-grande@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-rocky-mountain-río-grande@fs.fed.us), on the interactive plan revision web site at <http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com>, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

## **Community Discussion**

Participants discussed the three main themes related to vegetation, timber, and fire: forest health and sustainability, impacts of human activities, and fuels and fire on the forest. A summary of key themes from the discussion follows.

## **Forest Health and Sustainability**

### **What is the definition of a healthy forest?**

<b>Diversity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Varying ages and types of vegetation are present.</li><li>• Multiple animal species are present.</li><li>• Species of conservation concern (indicator species) are healthy.</li></ul>
<b>Ecosystem Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The forest properly performs functions such as carbon sequestration and decomposition.</li><li>• The forest regenerates after fires and resource utilization.</li><li>• The forest's natural processes are prevailing.</li></ul>
<b>Physical Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Green trees</i></li><li>• <i>Decomposing dead trees</i></li><li>• Clean water</li><li>• Natural fire</li></ul>

*Italics indicate topics about which participants expressed differing opinions.*

### **How does the definition of health apply to the Rio Grande National Forest?**

<b>Healthy Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Burned areas are regenerating.</li><li>• Insect infestations are consistent with a long-term cycle.</li><li>• Forest is regenerating from insect infestations.</li><li>• Vegetation species are diverse.</li></ul>
<b>Unhealthy Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Abundance of dead trees</li><li>• Unhealthy ponderosa pines at lower elevations</li></ul>

### **What is sustainable use of the forest?**

<b>Economic Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sustainability of businesses that rely on the forest differs depending on usage.</li><li>• Time frame of sustainability when relying on resources from the forest differs between industries.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Dead trees are only viable for a certain amount of time for logging and sawmill companies.</li></ul></li><li>• Human use is sustainable when not causing irreversible damage.</li></ul>
<b>Forest Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Forest is sustainable when birth and death rates of vegetation are roughly equal.</li><li>• Forest sustainability must be measured by meaningful metrics.</li><li>• Forest is sustainable when its condition is not harming the local community.</li></ul>
<b>Balance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Input (e.g., water, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, solar energy) equals output (e.g., cattle, trees, grass).</li><li>• Maintain sustainability by planting trees (not always feasible on large scale).</li></ul>

## Impacts of Human Activities

### **What human activities and influences are relevant to today's forest conditions?**

<b>Forest Service Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forest Service plans and management are not always adaptive enough to balance unforeseeable occurrences (e.g., allowing logging and sawmill companies to remove dead trees while still economically viable).</li> <li>• Opening and closing of forest access points affect why and how people enter certain areas.</li> <li>• Consider ecosystem services when assessing the impact of human activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Recreation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motorized vehicles and 4-wheelers are more prevalent now than in the past.</li> <li>• Recreational users do not always understand multiple uses of certain areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Grazing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grazing impacts riparian areas and wildlife.</li> <li>• Grazing can be used as a tool for vegetation management.</li> </ul>
<b>Impacts of Human Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human-caused stress on the forest depends on the scale at which it is done.</li> <li>• All activities can be harmful if done too often.</li> <li>• Forest Service staff must measure ecosystem services to fully know the impact of human activities and other unquantifiable changes.</li> </ul>
<b>Specific Locations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cattle are beneficial to forest health in the Upper Rio Grande.</li> <li>• Vegetation is not able to quickly regenerate in high-use alpine areas (e.g., Willow Lake, Sangre de Cristos).</li> <li>• Adaptive grazing practices must be introduced around La Garita.</li> <li>• Lower-elevation springs between piñon-juniper and alpine ecosystems are dry.</li> </ul>

## Fuels and Fire on the Forest

### **How should we handle the standing dead timber on the Rio Grande National Forest?**

<b>Logging Pros</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logging is less damaging to the ecosystem than a controlled burn.</li> <li>• Logging companies can target specific trees and areas to minimize impact.</li> <li>• Dead biomass needs to be removed if it is still economically feasible.</li> </ul>
<b>Logging Cons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all dead trees are economically viable for businesses.</li> <li>• Logging can damage other vegetation on the forest.</li> </ul>
<b>Forest Service Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The current range (1 million – 6 million) of salvageable areas does not provide enough diversity and should be extended.</li> <li>• Less than 10% of economically feasible dead trees are currently accessible.</li> <li>• The timeline for sustainability is different when looking at long-term goals (spruce growth) versus short-term goals (aspen growth).</li> <li>• Reclassify standing dead trees from a national asset to a national liability to provide flexibility for management of timber.</li> <li>• Removing standing dead timber now is a better use of tax dollars than fighting fires.</li> </ul>

### Should fire be used as a tool for management?

<b>Yes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Controlled burns are effective and necessary but risky given the current forest conditions.</li> <li>Fire has always been part of the forest.</li> <li>Small-scale treatments now make more sense than dealing with large-scale fires later.</li> <li>Natural fires should only be utilized when environmental conditions are favorable.</li> <li>Fires should be allowed to burn in wilderness areas, but encourage the construction of preventative fire lines and fire-adapted communities.</li> </ul>
<b>No</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are more houses on the forest than historically, which complicates the use of fire.</li> <li>Utilize other options such as the hydro-ax.</li> <li>Allow for small-scale thinning by individuals as a preventative measure.</li> <li>Allow logging companies to remove trees instead of relying on fire as a tool.</li> </ul>

### Additional Questions and Comments

Additional questions and comments posed by group members are printed in *italics* below, followed by answers provided by RGNF staff.

- Questions
  - *What will the forest look like in the future in terms of regeneration from fire?* Bark will come off the lower portion of the trees, and there will be lots of sap rot near the root. The trees will then rot through and fall over. During this time, understory vegetation will regenerate. This typically occurs over 40 – 50 years; however, the timeframe will vary depending on the site. Trees will fall over sooner in areas characterized by shallow and wet soils or by high wind. Choices made at meetings like this will impact what the forest looks like in the future.
  - *Are invasive species an issue on the RGNF?* Invasive insect, tree, and fungal species are not an issue on the forest. Invasive plants are mainly seen in typically disturbed areas such as on the roadside or on grazing land. In the future, we would like to convert off-site planting back to native species.
  - *How many years until this forest becomes sustainable for timber harvest again?* The trees on the forest are slow-growing. Spruce is typically on a 150-year rotation, so it will be a minimum of 150 years before the next generation of trees is available for harvest. The Forest Service does plant seedlings but mainly allows for natural regeneration.
  - *Does the Forest Service plant in order to promote regeneration?* Yes, depending on the management of the land and for which use(s) the land is designated. In areas with few young trees already present, planting is quicker than waiting for natural regeneration. The practice is expensive, so natural regeneration is more favorable. USFS is planting over 500 acres this year.
- Comments
  - USFS representatives spoke about timber and fire management and explained that fire can be used to determine future forest type. This is visible on the RGNF where there is a grouping of aspen trees along a thermal band that burned in the past and now has different vegetation than surrounding areas. Fire can also convert timber to grassland.
  - USFS representatives explained that it can be difficult to manage fires in some areas, especially where there are jackstrawed dead trees.
  - It would be helpful to take fieldtrips to the sites we are discussing.